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ABSTRACT

This research summary identifies major factors affecting the validity of language assessments in bilingual students. The four factors include: (1) determining which language is dominant and in which language the child should be tested; (2) recognizing that bilingual children may use language in a way that is qualitatively different from that of monolingual children; (3) recognizing the influence of cultural differences and the local environment; and (4) overcoming the insufficiencies of existing diagnostic instruments. Literature-based recommendations for selecting a battery of language assessments are offered, and research needs are listed. A 35-item bibliography on assessing language disorders in bilingual students accompanies the research summary. (JDD)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON HANDICAPPED AND GIFTED CHILDREN

ERIC/OSEP SPECIAL PROJECT ON INTERAGENCY INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

RESEARCH & RESOURCES ON SPECIAL EDUCATION

ABSTRACT 23
AUGUST 1989

ASSESSING THE LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES OF HISPANIC BILINGUAL STUDENTS

The difficulty of evaluating handicaps in bilingual students is widely recognized. When a bilingual student is suspected of having speech or language handicaps, the problem is even more complex because it is difficult to differentiate behaviors associated with acquiring a second language from those associated with language pathology.

Four major factors affect the validity of language assessments. First, when a child is in the process of losing his or her native language and acquiring a second language, it is often problematic to determine which language is dominant and in which language the child should be tested. Second, bilingual children may use language in a way that is qualitatively different from that of monolingual children. In fact, the normal process of language loss and second language acquisition may create behaviors that mimic pathological symptoms. This may affect test results. Third, cultural differences and the local environment may influence the child's use of language and thus affect test outcomes. Fourth, the diagnostic instruments currently in use often do not yield enough information about the child's abilities, are not available in an appropriate language or form, or are not accompanied by statistical information relevant to the student being tested.

Because of these problems, even assessments that rely on large batteries of diverse instruments in an effort to increase validity can present an inconsistent, confusing, and inconclusive picture of a bilingual child's language abilities. Recognition of these difficulties can lead to identification of areas in which research is needed.

LANGUAGE DOMINANCE

The dominant language is the one with which the child is more comfortable or proficient. Widespread assessment of language dominance resulted from a 1974 court case, *Lau* v. *Nichols*, which led to the development of procedures for identifying, assessing, and serving bilingual students. The process involves rating the student's relative proficiency in the two languages on a five-point scale. A Lau rating of A indicates that the child is monolingual in his or her native language; B, that the child speaks mostly the native language with limited English; C, that the level of proficiency in both languages is about equal; D, that the child predominantly speaks English but knows another language; and E, that the child is English monolingual.

A survey of 157 special education administrators in six states found that tests of language dominance were administered more frequently than any other type of language assessment test (Bell-Mick, 1983). Many assessments begin with a determination of language dominance, and subsequent tests are selected on the basis of the language dominance testing results (DeLeon & Cole, 1985).

However, it can be extremely difficult to obtain an accurate assessment of language dominance because a child may demonstrate different language dominance in different settings. A study of 60 7- to 10-year-old students conducted by DeLeon and Cole (1985) illustrated this difficulty. The study used the following three indicators of language dominance in an attempt to obtain a clearer picture of child and group language dominance distinctions: (a) information from parents about the language used in the home, (b) scores from the Spanish/English Language Performance Screening, and (c) the school districts' Lau ratings of the students. Instead of giving clear results, the use of the three indicators led to greater confusion because they did not provide similar measures of language dominance. The first described language dominance in the home; the second was an academic test that children tended to answer in English; and the third was most often based on parent or teacher reports at the time the child entered kindergarten.

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Another researcher has noted that the variance in these scores is most likely due to both differences in the methods of measurement and the children's tendency to be proficient in different languages within the different situations (Damico, personal communication, 1989).

LANGUAGE LOSS

Language loss is defined as an individual's change from the habitual use of one language to habitual use of another (Merino, 1983). Although the characteristics associated with temporary competition between two languages are largely unknown, a few studies have attempted to compare profiles of students in the process of language loss with students who are monolingual. For example, comparisons of the acquisition patterns of bilingual and English monolingual children found that the order of acquisition between kindergarten and first grade of direct and indirect object relationships was not similar for monolingual and bilingual children (Glad, Goodrich, & Hardy, 1979). A later study (Merino, 1983) found that bilingual children's production of both English and Spanish increased between kindergarten and grade 3, but that Spanish production dropped almost to kindergarten level in grade 4. The most severe loss of Spanish occurred in children who tended to use both English and Spanish with the same speaker. This alternating use of languages, dialects, or language styles, at the word, phrase, clause, or sentence level, is termed *code switching*.

Researchers have also noted that students in the process of language loss exhibit behaviors similar to those symptomatic of speech, language, or learning disabilities (Damico, Oller, & Storey, 1983; Mattes & Omark, 1984; Ortiz & Maldonado-Colon, 1986, as cited in Ortiz & Polyzoi, 1988). Thus poor comprehension, limited vocabulary, grammatical and syntactical errors, or discourse problems may signify handicapping conditions for some students, but for others they may merely reflect a lack of English proficiency.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The subject's social milieu and community environment, as well as cultural differences in such areas as concept of time and the role of religion and superstition (Grossman, 1984), can have a large impact on the use of language. In a study of cultural considerations in assessment, Hastings (1981) found that the responses of bilingual students to test items were influenced by lifestyles, the educational system, and the physical resources available in the classroom setting. Hastings recommended supplementing formal tests with informal ones especially designed for use in the home country and on material geared to specific cultural needs.

In a more recent study, DeLeon and Cole (1985) administered a large, multifaceted assessment battery to 60 students and asked two groups, nationally known experts and local diagnosticians, to interpret the students' scores with respect to their need for special services. Greater consistency was found among the decisions of local diagnosticians, a fact that was attributed to their greater knowledge of the children's school districts and the dialects and general language functioning of the area.

DIAGNOSTIC INSTRUMENTS

There are numerous problems with the application of traditional standardized instruments for language assessment. Such instruments typically measure discrete components of language such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. These types of measures have also been termed *surface-oriented measures*. They tap so-called knowledge of superficial aspects of language form, rather than true use of language or communication (Oller, 1979, as cited in Russell & Ortiz, 1989). Consequently, there is a discrepancy between skills tested and the child's actual linguistic repertoire (Rodriguez-Brown, 1986, as cited in Russell & Ortiz, 1988).

Additional problems appear when these tests are translated for use with students whose primary language is Spanish. Simple translations and adaptations of existing tests result in lower reliability and validity indexes (Hastings, 1981). If the test is administered by an examiner who reads the items in English followed by the native language, the procedure can produce invalid results. Sometimes tests are published in two languages and the two versions are assumed to be parallel when this has not been empirically verified. In addition, some translated versions of tests are not accompanied by local norms, leaving the impression that English norms are applicable.

Furthermore, translation can change the difficulty of items or of response options.

Words with similar meanings can be more difficult or more limited when translated into a second language. Sometimes this can even result in nonsensical phrasing.

Finally, a test that measures practical intelligence or common experience for Anglos may reflect only the degree of acculturation to Anglo values and practices when used with Hispanics (Plata, 1982).

Given the limitations of standardized tests, researchers have searched for a way to achieve broader measurements that more truly represent children's actual abilities. The concept of *communicative competence* has been used to expand the traditional view of language to include knowledge of when to use different forms of language in real-life situations and with different conversational partners (Hayes, 1982). The emphasis is on communication rather than on correctness of language form. This perspective is the foundation for a new set of measurement criteria, called *pragmatic criteria*, which represent the aspects of meaning in language that are related to the use of language in natural contexts. (In contrast, traditional instruments measure discrete structures of language in a standardized, artificial context.)

According to Russell and Ortiz (1988), pragmatic assessments focus on the interrelationships among the form and function of language, its structure and use, and the linguistic situational contexts of the dialogue. Such assessments provide integrated information about children's knowledge of the functions of language as well as structural accuracy. Pragmatic assessments examine relationships between the speaker and listener, the partners' shared social and cognitive knowledge of the world, and their knowledge of linguistic and pragmatic rules (Prutting, 1982, as cited in Russell & Ortiz, 1988).

A 1983 study compared pragmatic criteria to surface-oriented criteria for diagnosing language disorders in bilingual children. The pragmatic criteria studied included nonfluencies, revisions, delays, specificity of referential terms, abrupt topic shifts, inappropriate responses, and the need for multiple repetition of prompts. These measures were studied in three contexts in conversation with trained researchers: (a) playing with toys, (b) describing story-action pictures, and (c) conversing. Errors in the subject's speech were then counted and weighted. The two sets of criteria—pragmatic and surface-oriented—identified different groups as language disordered. Pragmatic criteria were better predictors of both academic achievement and teacher ratings. The authors concluded that the pragmatic criteria were more effective than the traditional morphological and syntactical criteria (Damico, Oller, & Storey, 1983).

A current study, being conducted by the Handicapped Minority Research Institute on Language Proficiency at the University of Texas at Austin, is investigating the use of pragmatic criteria in distinguishing limited English proficient students who have speech and language or learning disabilities from those who do not have handicaps (Ortiz & Polyzoi, 1988). The 3-year longitudinal study is exploring relationships among various measures of English and Spanish oral proficiency, placement decisions, and student achievement.

LANGUAGE ASSESSMENTS

There are diverse opinions of what the focus of language evaluations should be and what they should encompass. However, most experts recommend that an assessment battery include tests and methods representing multiple dimensions of language, including formal tests such as adapted instruments, Spanish tests, translated tests, or formal English tests as well as informal assessments such as language sampling or analysis of communication functions.

The cultural and community contexts of the student should be taken into account, and many recommend the use of assessment teams to provide a variety of perspectives. In addition to determining the child's language dominance and selecting additional tests on that basis, experts point out that diagnostic criteria should include evidence that a disorder occurs in both languages, not just in English. "Since speech and language disorders affect common language processes which underlie different surface structures spoken by the child (Cummins, 1982; 1984), it is not possible for a bilingual child to have a language disorder in one language and not in the other" (Juarez, 1983; Ortiz, 1984; as cited in Russell & Ortiz, 1988).

In current practice, however, it appears that English is the focus of many assessments. A study of services provided to 24 limited English proficient students and 28 English proficient Hispanic students in Texas found that English language proficiency was empha-

sized at initial and triennial evaluations even though successfully distinguishing linguistic differences from speech or language disorders requires comparison of students' dual language skills (Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1987).

Selection of the tests to be included in an assessment should also take into account the fact that even tests of the same type can measure different aspects of language. For example, a study of various language proficiency instruments—the Basic Inventory of Natural Language, Language Assessment Scales, and Bilingual Syntax Measure—found that each test has a different set of criteria and each identifies different sets of limited English proficient students. Each instrument has a different specific focus on language features and on the values it assigns to each feature (Wald, 1981).

Another study of instruments for identifying children of limited English speaking ability found no substantial relationship between the five well-known language assessment tests studied and found disagreement between the classifications of English proficiency levels and achievement test performance among the tests (Gillmore & Dickerson, 1979).

An additional concern is that students may give the appearance of proficiency in their daily interactions when they are not proficient in all aspects of the language. Once students have become proficient in English as indicated by their ability to have appropriate face-to-face conversation, there may be no readily apparent reason why they should not be administered English tests or transferred to an English-only program. However, data from studies of immigrants' learning of English show that it takes 5 to 7 years to approach grade norms in the academic aspects of English proficiency (Cummins, 1982).

RESEARCH NEEDS

There is a great need to develop valid procedures for the diagnosis of language disorders in bilingual students. DeLeon and Cole (1985) noted some prominent areas in which further research is needed:

- Assessing language dominance.
- Accounting for the disparity between the home language and the requirements of the school.
- Discriminating differences between language disordered and nondisordered Spanish/English bilingual children.
- Determining what should be included in evaluations.
- Investigating native language loss and the process of acquiring a second language, including developmental profiles.

In addition, Ortiz and Polyzoi (1988) have identified a number of research needs in the areas of pragmatic measures and discourse analysis, including

- Developing better procedures for eliciting conversation from subjects.
- Exploring additional criteria for pragmatic assessments.
- Exploring methods of counting and weighting errors.
- Creating more time-efficient analysis procedures.
- Developing a means of accounting for code switching in oral language testing.
- Developing guidelines for considering variance due to developmental language acquisition.

DeLeon and Cole (1985) have stressed that factors that may not have anything to do with language pathology—language dominance, language loss in the native language, IQ, socioeconomic background, familiarity with the types of tasks required by tests, family language dynamics, and other factors—could lead to differences in test performance that could be interpreted erroneously as pathological. The importance and variability of these factors imply that diagnostic professionals should be extremely cautious in interpreting bilingual children's performance on language tests.

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